

# BECOMING SACRED.

## THE USE OF THE BODY IN IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

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*This paper analyzes various ways of using of the human body and senses in the religious practice of the Catholic movement the Neocatechumenal Way. This religious movement, established in Spain in 1960s, especially emphasizes ritual practice, which is considered the main instrument of communication with the sacred Other. Innovations in ritual practice and their symbolic interpretations are followed by careful planning of how to achieve full engagement, contemplative as well as bodily and sensory, of the members in ritual acts. The aim of this paper is to make a contribution, based on new fieldwork data, to research on bodily and sensory dimensions of ritual practice.*

Keywords: Neocatechumenal Way, anthropology of religion, senses, body.

*Avtor v razpravi analizira različne načine rabe človeškega telesa in čutov v religioznih ritualnih praksah katoliškega gibanja Neokatehumenska pot. Religiozno gibanje, ustanovljeno v Španiji v 60. letih, posebej poudarja ritualne prakse, ki jih imajo za glavno sredstvo komunikacije s svetim Drogim. Inovacije v ritualnih praksah in njihovo simbolično interpretacijo spremlja skrbno načrtovanje, kako doseči polni angažma udeležencev ritualnega dejanja, tako na kontemplativni kakor telesni in čutni ravni. Namen razprave je na osnovi novih terenskih podatkov prispevati raziskavo o telesnih in čutnih dimenzijah ritualnih praks.*

Ključne besede: neokatehumenska pot, antropologija religije, čuti, telo.

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### INTRODUCTION

At one moment of the ritual called the *lucernarium*, all the members of the Neocatechumenal Way hear an announcement similar to this:

*Soon, the lights will be turned off in this room, and there will be complete darkness. Use this time to concentrate on yourselves and to observe the egocentricity you live in, as well as the darkness that surrounds you. At first you will not feel anything, but after several seconds you will hear the person at your side breathing, you will feel his breath or maybe his presence. This darkness is to bring to consciousness the selfish darknesses you live in, and to show you the need to direct yourselves to other people.*

After the announcement, the lights slowly begin to fade in the closed room and in a few moments it becomes impossible to see anything. The people are left to themselves and the darkness. At first they can only hear their own breathing, and then the breathing of the persons around them. The deprivation of sight sharpens other senses: they can sense smells and touches more intensely, be it the accidental touches of their neighbors or the circulation of the air. A few minutes later, rays of light slowly begin to appear, becoming brighter and brighter, to the point that they can recognize the Easter candle carried by the priest, who

stops several times and chants: *Jesus Christ is our light and our salvation*. When the priest reaches the altar, all the lights in the room are lit, and one of the Neocatechumenal leaders reminds the people that the darkness symbolizes human selfishness, the light that breaks it represents Jesus Christ, and everyone present is invited to be that same light to the world and to others.

Two things about the Neocatechumenal Way can already be noticed here: 1) it aims to change its members and make them sacred (Christ-like), and 2) it uses rituals that carefully employ human senses as a means of transformation.

This is my point of departure. This paper considers the use of the senses in rituals of the Neocatechumenal Way, and is structured in three sections. The first section reviews the origin and development of this new religious movement, the second presents its ritual life and some of the ways the senses are used in it, and the third provides an interpretation of how and why the senses, ritual, and identity transformation are so intimately connected.

### WHAT IS THE NEOCATECHUMENAL WAY?

*Be humble and faithful to the Church, and the Church shall be faithful to you* [Arguello 1996: 16], said Pope Paul VI in 1977 to Kiko Arguello, the founder of the Neocatechumenal Way. He thus expressed the ambivalent, permissive, but also restrictive attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards innovations under its umbrella, a stance that has also been evident throughout the history of the Neocatechumenal Way, a Catholic movement that began in Spain in 1964.

The Neocatechumenal Way was founded when Francisco Arguello, a 26-year-old artist, underwent a deep existential crisis and experienced a mystic vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Together with the organizer of the mission, Carmen Hernandez, he created the first Neocatechumenal community in the most poverty-stricken suburb of Madrid. This community had no structure whatsoever at first, and its gatherings and entire ritual life were improvised and took place at random. Things changed after a visit by the local Catholic bishop; he not only supported the activities of the community, but also made possible its expansion to the other parishes in his diocese. In order to respond to this recognition on the part of the Church and to increase the scope of their activities, the founders created a hierarchy with themselves at its head and formalized the work of the movement, establishing the patterns by which future communities would be created and structured, and how their ritual life would unfold.

At this stage of its development, the idea of the name of the movement emerged. As stated by the cofounder of the movement, Hernandez:

*[At the beginning] we knew nothing of the catechumenate. We proclaimed Jesus Christ and this created a climate of unity and community. To our great surprise, we realized that baptism was the way. Through the failures in the small town of Arguelles, we*

*discovered the need for a catechumenal way to the discovery of baptism. Everything grew out of experience: nothing was conceived in advance.* [Hernandez 2000: 4]

As can be seen, the founders spontaneously thought of the catechumenate because, as the path of preparation for baptism, it had been the fundamental means of initiation from the very beginning of Christianity. A new initiation – or the new (*neo*) catechumenate – had become necessary because a loss of the meaning of the sacred Other and of the sacred self had been noticed among many Catholics, both among those in Spain in the 1960s, as well as in today's Croatia and throughout the world.

One case in point: Sunday is a day of obligation when all Catholics are required to attend mass that can be taken as a good example of the loss of meaning of sacred symbols. Sociological research in Spain shows that only about 20% attend Sunday mass in Spain, and the situation is similar in Croatia [Marinović-Jerolimov 2001]. Taking this into account, Arguello says: *We all know that this traditional belief by which all are Christians no longer corresponds with the truth* [Arguello 2000: 18] because, he continues, modern Catholics are: 1) desacralized – *there is a loss of feeling for the sacred; that is, people no longer see God anywhere: they have lost the feeling for God in their own work, the closeness of God in the family, and so on* [2000: 25]; 2) de-Christianized – that is, *with the evident rupture between religion and life that we notice among people. There are people that go to mass on Sunday, and even take Communion, but for whom this has no influence whatsoever on their lives* [2000: 30], and 3) experiencing a crisis in their own faith that has come about *because no signs of faith are given anywhere* [2000: 38].

All of this causes personal dilemmas among Catholics and, in some cases, fragmentation of identity, which has major consequences in everyday life. Therefore, it is no wonder that Arguello has stated that all [neocatechumenal] catechesis [and communities] are full of *cripples* [Arguello 2000: 74], meaning people undergoing life crises, people that are lost, disappointed, lonely, and so on. Arguello offers a sound example of disintegrated formal Catholic identity from his own experience:

*For me, the encounter with Jesus was a liberation, something wonderful in comparison with what I had suffered previously because of my complexes, because of my hatred of my father and my mother, because of my brothers, because of my difficulties in communication with others, because of my conflicts with girls, because of a series of events that forced me into slavery; but, above all, because of my inability to love, because of my immoderate desire to find myself, to triumph, and to win.* [Arguello 2000: 99]

The proponents of the Neocatechumenal Way are aware that many Catholics are in such relatively deprived situations, and therefore they see their task as restoring coherence to the Catholic symbolic self; that is, emphasizing this to anyone interested and offering from the very beginning the creation of Neocatechumenal communities. As an example, their invitations to catechesis, by which the Way commences, state that all those that are lonely, unsure, weary, ill, and so on are welcome to join.

This very fact that sacred symbols no longer have any meaning for many Catholics shows

that contemporary Catholic structures have become inadequate, and that the traditional religious structure has become weak and lost authority. As is known from the anthropology of religion, such situations open up symbolic areas and are a common place for the emergence of new religious movements. Although in some cases these newly created movements seek to provide completely new “sacred” symbolic systems, the Neocatechumenal Way limits its objective only to the reintegration of disintegrated Catholic symbols of the sacred. As the cofounder Hernandez says: *What must be done first is to evangelize those within the Church, to re-evangelize the Church itself, which is what the pope and all the bishops are saying: evangelization within the Church, in order for it to be able to carry out its vocation* [Hernandez 2000: 21]. In this, the new evangelization is nothing other than a new initiation into the Catholic symbolic system.

Limited space prevents a deeper discussion here of all the sociological, cultural, and specifically internal Roman Catholic reasons for the emergence of the Neocatechumenal Way. It is clear that the Catholic symbolic self is seen as disintegrated and the Neocatechumenal Way seeks to reintegrate it. As the major tool in this “sacred” transformation of identity, it offers years, or even decades, of ritual life comprised of numerous phases – rites of passage of a sort – developed in keeping with the initiation models of the original Christian communities, but also in line with the official Vatican document on the manner of introducing adults to Christianity. In short, the ritual life of a Neocatechumenal community consists of at least two liturgical events per week. Every few years the community is submitted to scrutinies – rite-of-passage-type rituals – in which its readiness to progress to the next, always more demanding, ritual stage is examined. This continues in the same way for some twenty years, after which the life of the neo-catechumen becomes deeply radicalized and everyday practice is ritualized. After passing through all the stages, the community of what Arguello now calls *mature Christians* [cf. Blasques 1994: 74–76] renews baptismal promises at the Easter celebration and completes the Neocatechumenal Way, ready to be the *light, salt, and yeast* [Statut 2002: 33] of the world, and, if the need arises, *as a servant of Jehovah, [prepared] to lay down his or her life for Him* [Arguello 2000: 253–256].

Although the movement is now represented globally – on all continents, in 103 countries, 800 dioceses, and 5,000 parishes with 17,000 communities [*Alfa y Omega*<sup>1</sup> 211/2000] – it has become so uniform that there are no differences whatsoever in its practice, other than those of language.

#### DEVELOPING “THE SENSE OF OCCASION”

As can be seen, the Neocatechumenal Way dedicates remarkable attention to its ritual activities and its leaders believe that only through full, active, and lengthy (over 20 years) participation in the movement’s ritual life can a person achieve the goal: securing a new and

<sup>1</sup> *Alfa y Omega* is the weekly newspaper of the Archdiocese of Madrid.

sacred identity. Ritual is seen as the main vehicle for communication with the sacred Other and therefore the leaders of the Way strive to be innovative in ritual practices and their symbolic interpretation. The idea is to make the members engage entirely in the ritual.

Consequently, participation in the ritual must be complete, involving the whole person, which means that the human body also assumes a very important dimension. One way of using the human body and its senses in Neocatechumenal ritual acts has already been seen at the beginning of this article. Some other means are illustrated by the examples below.

## HEARING

The sense of hearing deserves to be mentioned first because it is especially stressed in Neocatechumenal rituals. The catechists believe (and it is said at the very beginning of the introductory catechesis via the commencement of the Way) that belief comes through listening to preaching. The phrase *belief comes through listening to preaching* is one of the catechists' favorites, and in accordance with it preaching is used as the main medium of catechization. During some rites of passage (stages of the Way), catechists preach for hours and the Neocatechumens receive all important information about the movement and their personal spiritual growth through listening. They listen to various types of verbal expression: preaching, Bible readings, members' personal experiences, liturgical songs, and so on.

For example, at the beginning of every ritual the gathered Neocatechumens listen to an introduction to the Biblical passages that will be heard during that particular ceremony. After having heard the scheduled texts, they listen to the believers present, who testify their personal experience based on what was read – that is, what precisely those words say about their lives. After the testimonies, those gathered listen to the sermon delivered by the priest leading the ritual. The ritual always includes singing, and hence listening, to liturgical songs based on the Biblical passages selected for the occasion.

Singing is a very important ritual activity and everyone is expected to know all the words of all the songs they have been taught (as members progress from phase to phase, they learn new songs). From this it is obvious that songs – both listening to them and singing them – are an integral part of Neocatechumenal enculturation. Listening to members speak about their personal experiences is especially moving. Members sometimes testify about the most stressful and difficult situations in their lives, and listening to them can create stress for everyone, as the listeners' tears often testify.

## SIGHT

Sight is used in numerous and original ways – which is not surprising because the founder, Kiko Arguello, is a recognized painter. There are always some paintings by Arguello in the

ritual space, all with very strong symbolic meaning, known to the members. One example is the following:

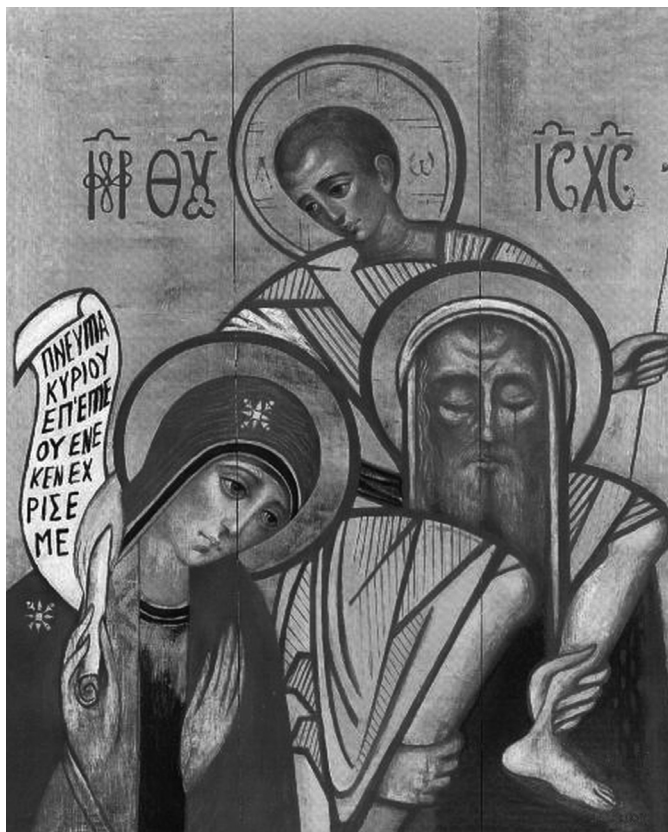


Fig. 1: The Return of the Sacred Family to Nazareth by Kiko Arguello [Photo by G. P. Šantek].

The Neocatechumenal interpretation of this painting goes something like this:

*The icon shows the return of the Sacred Family from Jerusalem to Nazareth, after the boy was found in the Temple. Saint Joseph carries Jesus over his shoulders, who turns toward his mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. She hands to him the papyrus with the word of the mission [Isaiah 61, 1–2]: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me . . . .” Saint Joseph’s face has the characteristics of the Servant of Yahweh, because his son must be prepared to be the Servant of God, who bears the sin of the world [Isaiah 53]. The fact that an adolescent Jesus is carried over the shoulders indicates the importance of the father in the Sacred Family and thus in all families. The importance of this is underlined in the life of the Neocatechumenal communities, which must be a sign to the entire world. These communities are established in parishes and are similar to the Sacred Family of Nazareth. The Neocatechumens try to live in them according to Saint Paul’s instructions [Ephesians 4]. The gesture of the Blessed Virgin Mary handing the word to Jesus can be found in*





Fig. 2: A Neocatechumenal community celebrating Communion.

*many icons of the Orthodox Church (the Eleusa Kykkotissa).* [<http://www.geocities.com/elneocatecumenado/sgdafamilia.htm>]

Accordingly, the organization of ritual space is also very important and filled with symbolic meaning.

The scene in Figure 2 organizes space in such a way that it symbolizes the human body; in the words of a Neocatechumen in his late twenties: *The priest is up there on the throne because he represents the head, the rostrum represents the mouth, the altar the stomach, and all present the limbs of Christ's mystical body.* The organization of space thus follows the “body analogy.” One possible explanation for using it here can be found in Bowie’s ideas that, by using analogies with the body, which is the cue to elaborate social constructions, cultural concepts make an attempt to appear natural [Bowie 2000: 43].

Figure 3 shows how the altar is arranged with flowers to please the sense of sight. A painting by Arguello is also seen on the rostrum and there are flowers beneath it.



Fig. 3: The altar [Photo by G. P. Šantek].

## TASTE

Catholics eat bread and drink wine ritually transformed into Jesus' body and blood during Communion. This is also done by the Neocatechumens, but one element connected to the sense of taste was previously unknown for me. In a ritual connected to the stage "The Invitation to Prayer," Neocatechumens must put a small lump of salt into their mouths and wait until it is dissolved. It is not pleasant to have a lump of salt dissolve in your mouth, but this is done because it is symbolically important. The catechists consider it necessary to understand the mission of Christians in the world: as we need salt to live, other people need us to live. We need to be salt for them and for the world, and consuming a real lump of salt helps us remember this forever.

## SMELL

The least involved sense is smell, and this is involved in the usual Catholic way, through incense during some celebrations of mass.

## TOUCH

The only different thing that the Neocatechumens normally do and other Catholics almost never do, as far as I know, is kissing one another during the rite of peace.

All these examples, however limited, show that the Neocatechumenal Way is a very structured and formalized movement. It is thus expected that some ideas of controlling the body must be developed. Accordingly, at some moments in various rituals everyone is expected to perform certain bodily movements – for example, to bow, stand up, sit, kneel, and (although very seldom) lie down or dance. All these movements are also filled with meaning understandable to every member. It must be stressed that some of these movements (e.g., praying the "Our Father" with open hands) can be (and are) used as identification markers in some liturgical events that involve all Catholics.

During the ritual "The Invitation to Prayer" Neocatechumens receive the "Liturgy of Hours". Kneeling symbolizes their respect for the word and for the priest, who is always a symbol of Christ.

## FROM EXPERIENCE TO BELIEVING

Why is the body and analogy with it used so much in the Neocatechumenal Way? The fact that *everybody* has personal experience with it, knows it well, and easily understands all



comparisons with it makes the human body very convenient for symbolic usage. Merleau-Ponty demonstrated that the body is not passive:

*as the world acts on our bodies, so our experience of being in the world affects and shapes the phenomena we perceive. There is continual interaction between the embodied individual and the social and natural world of which the individual is a part.* [Cit. in Bowie 2000: 44]

Continuing with Bowie's insights, because the human body is simultaneously experienced subjectively and objectively, it belongs both to the individual and to the wider social body [cf. Bowie 2000: 41]. This makes the body especially suitable for social exercising, formation, and control, or as a place of verification of the acceptance of social rules – defined, naturally, by the holder of power. This is why the lack of freedom of movement corresponds to the amount of totalitarian tendencies in a society or social group.

In addition, what is experienced stimulates more intense emotions than what is not. Or, as Douglas said: *The more personal and intimate the source of the ritual symbolism, the more telling its message* [Douglas 1976: 114]. Consequently, when the sensory stimuli during the ritual are stronger the feelings are more intense,<sup>2</sup> and when the feelings are more intense the “message” of the ritual has better chances of being adopted. This leads to the more successful realization of the ritual purpose.

We as human beings continually create patterns of meaning out of our individual and collective experience [Bowie 2000: 48].

The leaders of the Neocatechumenal Way surely know this and seek to achieve such forms of ritual engagement so that, by participating in them and acquiring new networks of meaning through them, each member can attain a new, sacred identity. Ritual, therefore, is very structured and the use of the body is carefully taught, following the well-known model that the modification of behavior and modification of beliefs go hand in hand [cf. Bowie 2000: 55]. Truly, anthropology has known for a long time that the body, mind, and emotions are



Fig. 4: “The Invitation to Prayer” [Photo by G. P. Šantek].

<sup>2</sup> This is because the senses are located between the physical and the cognitive [cf. Bendix 2005: 3].

intimately connected. The first part of this trio has long been rather neglected in anthropology but, as we can see today, things are changing. We anthropologists have, obviously, finally decided to *live in the flesh*, and not only in the symbolic kingdom of the mind.

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## POSTAJATI SVET.

## KORIŠĆENJE TIJELA KOD TRANSFORMACIJE IDENTITETA

*Neokatekumenski put je katolički pokret utemeljen u Španjolskoj 1964. godine od Francisca Arguella, dvadesetšestogodišnjeg slikara kojemu se nakon duboke egzistencijalne krize objavila Blažena Djevica Marija i dala u zadatak osnivanje malih kršćanskih zajednica, i Carmen Hernandez, organizatorice misija. Poslanje je Neokatekumenskoga puta osnivanje malih zaje-*

*dnica u kojima će pojedinci postupno, putem višegodišnjega sudjelovanja u ritualnom životu, strukturiranom na način sličan obredima prijelaza, steći novu osobnost, novo „ja“, koje će biti suobličeno svetome drugom i tako i njegov uprisutnitelj u ovom svijetu.*

*U radu je predstavljen dio načina na koje se u ritualnim praksama ovoga pokreta, glavnom sredstvu transformacije osobnosti i susreta sa svetim, koriste ljudsko tijelo i osjeti. Inovacije u obredima i njihove simboličke interpretacije pomno su promišljene kako bi se postiglo potpuno i cjelovito sudjelovanje pripadnika, što se smatra nužnim preduvjetom uspješnosti svete transformacije identiteta.*

*Neki primjeri potpunoga i aktivnoga uključenja pripadnika u ritualni susret sa svetim na Neokatekumenskome putu, povezani s angažmanom tijela i osjeta, navedeni u članku su:*

*1. Angažiranje sluha. Na prvome je mjestu jer je na Putu osobito naglašeno. Ritualno stariji, katehisti, vjeruju da vjera dolazi preko propovijedanja i zato je propovijedanje glavni medij katehizacije, neokatekumenske enkulturacije, a slušanje glavni način dobivanja svih važnih informacija o pokretu i vlastitom duhovnom rastu u njemu. Slušaju se različiti tipovi verbalnih ekspresija: propovijedanje, biblijska čitanja, osobna iskustva pripadnika, obredu prikladne pjesme, spontane molitve, itd.*

*2. Angažiranje vida. Vid je provociran na brojne i originalne načine, što ne bi trebalo biti čudno jer je osnivač Arguello akademski slikar. U prostoru odvijanja obreda uvijek je neka slika naslikana od njega, ispunjena simboličkim značenjem znanim pripadnicima. Također, i organizacija samoga obrednog prostora vrlo je važna i ispunjena simbolikom: svećenik na tronu predstavlja – glavu, propovijedaonica – usta, oltar – trbuh, a svi nazočni – udove mističnoga tijela Kristova. Jedan od razloga da se pri organizaciji prostora koristi analogija s tijelom mogao bi biti taj što se na taj način kulturni koncepti uvjerljivo predstavljaju prirodnima.*

*3. Angažiranje okusa. Kao i drugi katolici neokatekumeni tijekom euharistije konzumiraju kruh i vino (oni su za njih Kristovo tijelo i krv). Međutim, konzumiranje grumena soli tijekom obreda povezanog s etapom „Inicijacija u molitvu“ dosta je rijetka ritualna praksa. Neokatekumeni u njoj u usta primaju grumen soli i čekaju da im se on otopi. Osjećaj nije vrlo ugodan no simbolički je važan. Katehisti ovo smatraju nužnim kako bi se shvatilo poslanje kršćana u svijetu: kao što ljudi trebaju sol za život tako i svijet treba kršćane. Oni trebaju biti sol svijeta i rastopiti se prilikom davanja za njega a kušanje grumena soli upečatljiv je način podsjećanja na ovu zadaću kršćana.*

*I iz ovih primjera uočljivo je da je Neokatekumenski put vrlo strukturiran i formaliziran pokret pa su na njemu očekivano razvijene i različite ideje kontroliranja tijela i njegovih pokreta. Sukladno njima, u određenom trenutku obreda očekuje se da svi ili dio pripadnika ustanu, prignu se, sjednu, kleknu, ili, npr. zaplešu. I ovi su pokreti ispunjeni značenjem koje zna svaki pripadnik, a neki od njih u određenim situacijama, primjerice prilikom pribivanja obredima koji uključuju sve katolike a ne samo neokatekumene, mogu poslužiti i kao identifikacijski marker, npr. moljenje Očenaša raširenih ruku.*

*Zašto je tijelo i analogija s njime tako mnogo korištena na Neokatekumenskome putu? Činjenica da svi imamo osobno iskustvo tijela, dobro ga poznajemo i lako shvaćamo sve poredbe s njime,*

*tijelo čini osobito prikladnim za simboličku uporabu. Osim toga, naše tijelo nije pasivni primatelj podražaja iz svijeta, ono i oblikuje fenomene koje percipiramo, a time što je istovremeno iskušavano i subjektivno i objektivno pripada kako pojedincu tako i širem, društvenom tijelu. To ga čini osobito prikladnim za vježbanje društvene kontrole i oblikovanje ponašanja ili provjeru prihvaćanja društvenih pravila.*

*Dobro je znano da ono što je osobno iskušano provocira snažnije emocije od onoga što nije, odnosno da osobniji i intimniji izvor ritualnoga simbolizma dovodi do snažnije poruke. Posljedično, što su osjetilne provokacije tijekom obreda snažnije to su osjećaji koji se uz njih vežu jači, a kada su oni intenzivniji i „poruka“ rituala ima veće izgleda biti usvojenom, što i jest jedna od najvažnijih svrha svih rituala.*

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